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UNIVERSITY FORUM FOR HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT – RESEARCH AND PRACTICE ACROSS EUROPE – EDINBURGH 2014

The fifteenth international “University Forum for Human Resource Development (UFHRD): Research and Practice across Europe” conference took place on 4–6 June 2014 at Napier University in Edinburgh, Scotland. Its theme – Reflecting upon the Past, Shaping the Future – inspired the conference participants, who included both scholars and practitioners, to discuss the changes taking place in HRD and the emerging trajectories for the future development of the discipline. The conference theme was a result of the ever more frequently expressed need to think more deeply about the discipline’s achievements to date, to draw the appropriate conclusions, and to consider its position in a world of multi-dimensional change. The conference was initiated and organised by two scholars well-known to the discipline – Dr David McGuire and Professor Thomas Garavan (both of Napier University in Edinburgh), who discharged their duties superbly.

In their welcoming address, the organisers explained that they had chosen their theme drawing inspiration from such disciplines as HRM, education, and organisational behaviour. Extensive HRD research initiatives and simultaneous theoretical reflection far exceed the scope of the existing positivistic paradigm and require a more diverse methodological approach. Expectations for the conclusions of the discussions held during the conference were thus high: indications of new theories, paradigms and conceptual frameworks that would better equip the discipline of HRD to illuminate contemporary debate and to offer meaningful solutions to the questions and problems that arise.

As it was necessary in the relatively short period of two-and-a-half days to give more than 220 participants from almost all of the continents of the world the chance to speak, organising the conference presented a stiff challenge. At the same time, it was imperative to structure the conference schedule to allow for a thorough thematic discussion. As a result, the presentations submitted were classified according to 16 subject groups and time was found for a poster session.

The sessions were held in parallel – each allowing four or five participants to speak. It was possible during the conference for all the participants to meet at plenary sessions, whose subject-matter followed that of the lectures given by the keynote speakers. The latter were an eminent group of people: Professor Jonathan Passmore (University of Evora, Portugal), Professor Eugene Sadler-Smith (University of Surrey), Professor Wendy Ruona (University of Georgia), and Hazel MacKenzie from the National Health Service (NHS) in Scotland.

The first day's plenary session belonged to a paper given by Professor Jonathan Passmore (University of Evora – Portugal) entitled "Coaching Research: the Good, The Bad and the Ugly", which served as an introduction to the discussions and presentations held in the parallel sessions. The latter featured such questions as assessment and measurement in HRD (L. Booth, M. Blackburn, S. Warwick), career development and diversity (Y. Park, S. Minnis), creativity and sustainability (K. Bartlett, T. Jandris), and organisational change (T. Suratpipit, G. McClean). While some of the presentations and lectures were based on theoretical reflections and proposals, more rested on research, whose variety offered something to interest every participant. My own interest was captured by the issues of career management and development addressed from the perspective of key theoretical concepts (Professor Yongho Park, Incheon National University).

Hazel MacKenzie (NHS Education for Scotland) gave her views on the dilemmas of leadership in the organisation she represents (NHS) during a plenary session held on the second day of the conference. Her inspiring lecture touched on such issues as the transition from management to leadership, the perception of leadership as an art rather than as a position in an organisation, the essence of leadership understood as the collective intelligence of employees – not of an individual leader, and the balance between the relationships leaders are involved in: with themselves, with others, and with organisations.

Presentations on the following issues were given during the parallel sessions: workplace learning (R. J. Curtis, L. Nichol, S. Williams), learning in different age groups (R. Warhurst, K. Black), coaching managers (J. Cook), women's leadership (V. Stead, C. Elliott), mentoring and its connection with employability (J. Haddock-Millar), and diversity education for business professionals (S. Nachmias, Ch. Mortimer, B. Paddison).

The second plenary session of that day and the lecture given by the keynote speaker, Professor Eugene Sadler-Smith (University of Surrey), entitled "Problems and Potential in HRD Research: A Design Science Perspective", was of a conceptual nature and was entirely compatible with the cognitive aims of the conference. The question the author asked, and was seeking answers to, was that of the "product" of the academic discipline that HRD is becoming. He situated his arguments within the historical perspective of descriptive and explanatory academic disciplines and concluded from his analysis that HRD is a discipline aspiring to the former category. Though what he said was open to question, there is no doubt that

Professor Sadler-Smith tackled the fundamental problem of the discipline's identity and its connections with other disciplines.

The parallel sessions included presentations on talent management (E. Wuellner), organisational engagement (R. Beattie, F. Crossan), global HRD (J. Burkhardt, E. Bennett), and diversity management (S. Seraj, M. Branine).

The third day began with a plenary session featuring a lecture given by Professor Wendy Ruona (University of Georgia, USA) entitled "Exploring Human Resource Development: Ideology, Identity & Culture", which addressed the main aims of the conference and determined the issues to be taken up in the parallel sessions. These included the theoretic and empirical aspects of leadership (R. Hamlin, T. Patel, R. Mulder, T. Braden) and talent management (A. Tymon), the growing role of technology in learning (distance learning – J. Ostrander, D. Russ-Eft), the cross-cultural dimensions of HRD (A. Miś, K. Wanatishart), and organisational strategic learning capability (H. Moon, W. Ruona, T. Valentine).

The parallel sessions that closed the conference discussed the global issues and dimensions of HRD (I. Dusoye), learning, training and growth in the organisation (V. Griggs, J. Rae, R. Holden, A. Lawless, R. Carbery, T. Garavan), leadership and talent management (M. Hartog, Ch. Rigby, D. Wilson), and the implementation of technology in the learning organisation (E. Bennett, R. Grenier).

The plenary and parallel sessions were not the only fora of communication between the conference participants. Both were accompanied by poster sessions – each presentation imbued with the author's own, particular approach. The subjects included mentoring (R. Follmann), virtual scenario planning (R. McWhorter, S. Luncham) and a comparison of the Bologna Process in Portugal and Poland (E. Tome, K. Susabowska). The organisers also offered "Innovative Sessions", which dealt with practical matters associated with publishing in key HRD journals (Editorial Team of HRDQ), teaching trends on HRD courses and programmes (P. Tosey, V. Anderson), and HRD courses offered by distance learning (Y. Choo, A. Zachmeier, and others).

Another form of communication at the conference was the Welcome Reception on the first day, during which prizes and awards for individuals and teams in numerous fields of activity involving HRD practitioners and theorists were announced. The conference banquet, which afforded the opportunity to establish less formal international contacts and to maintain existing networks, was held on the evening of the second day in rooms at the National Museum of Scotland.

The conference was accompanied by several meetings for doctoral students as well as for the editorial teams of *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, *Human Resource Development International*, and the *European Journal of Training and Development*.

The conference provided an opportunity to articulate the new ideas and concepts, as well as new paradigms and conceptual frameworks, which constitute the specificity of this academic discipline. It allowed for the formulation of new research questions and a re-examination of "old" questions in the context of

the discipline's changing environment, which is forcing its reconceptualisation. The emerging challenges mean that it is becoming necessary to answer fundamental questions about the role of HRD in the modern world, to specify who the "clients" of HRD are, and to identify its most applicable "outputs" in a comprehensively changing global environment and at the local level.

The numerous conference participants, the wealth of subjects, and the theoretical and practical perspectives and presentations, made it possible to attempt to find answers to the aforementioned questions – answers that, though they remain incomplete and provisional, are nevertheless inspiring and open up new fields for research and renewed reflection.

It is worth adding that the conference location, Edinburgh, was an additional attraction for the participants. It is a city that combines tradition and modernity, revealing how the one grows from the other; and how that interdependency – by an effect of synergy – produces and shapes something new, unique, and dynamic. It was this particular set of circumstances, that is, tradition and the challenges of modernity, that formed the basis of the discussion, of the knowledge sharing, and of the forging of relationships resulting in international cooperation that is an investment in the future of this discipline.

I would like to finish by invoking the words of the conference organisers: "It is fascinating to be a part of the HRD community. Our field of research has an energetic and devoted group of theorists and scholar-practitioners who are capable of ensuring its uninterrupted growth".

We have planned a further meeting in 2015 in Cork, Ireland.